

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

SHIFTING GEARS PROJECT
NORTH ADAMS

INFORMANT: WILLIAM BEER
INTERVIEWER: JOELLE COLLINS
DATE: APRIL 4, 1989

J = JOELLE
B = BILL (WILLIAM)

SF-NA-T003

J: This is Joelle Collins and I'm interviewing Bill Beer on May 10th 1989 for an oral history project. Bill, where were you born?

B: Well I was born right here in North Adams. [Both laugh]

J: Okay, and where are your grandparents from?

B: Um, let's see. On my father's side they're from North Adams and on my mother's side my grandmother was born in North Adams and my grandfather is from [unclear], South Dakota.

J: Okay. Do you remember any stories that your grandparent told you about living in North Adams when they were younger?

B: Uh, not too many. My grandfather on my father's side tells me a lot of stories about working in the factories, particularly my grandmother when she worked at Sprague's. There was a lot of uh, they described a lot of working with chemicals. And after a long time of working there she got really sick. And a lot of people that she was working with got sick from these chemicals, but didn't know what they were doing at that time. Um, let's see. I guess that's about it. He talks about working in the uh, the camps during the great depression, [J: Umhm] but that's, other than that (--)

J: Okay. Did your parents always live here?

B: Yeah, my father has always, both my parents always lived here.

J: And did (--) So they grew up and went to school here?

B: Umhm.

J: Do you remember them describing any stories about what happened while they were growing up, or what North Adams was like?

B: Uh, no. They usually (--) It doesn't seem that it's changed a whole lot, not from what they've described. No, I don't know.

J: What does your father do for a living right now?

B: Well I really don't know. [Both chuckle] As far as I know he is a quality control supervisor at a plant in Pittsfield.

J: Oh so he doesn't work in North Adams?

B: No.

J: Okay. So have you always lived in North Adams?

B: Yeah, for the most part.

J: And what has it been like growing up here?

B: Uh, I think, I think North Adams is just a wonderful community. I just, I love it here. And I think as opposed to growing up in a large city, it's a lot different. The environment is different. You are not exposed to, to the crime or whatever else the big cities are, usually have problems with. Um, you kind of live kind of sheltered in North Adams. You are not opened to all of these, all of these problems.

J: Do you think that in any cases that might be a disadvantage, to be sheltered?

B: Uh, well it might be, but I don't think, I don't think that there is really that many disadvantages. For the most part I think it is to my advantage that I grew up here [J: umhm] rather than in a large city.

J: What do you think that you get out of a small town environment? Do you think there's a closeness with people, or just in general?

B: Oh definitely, definitely. There's a much closer togetherness with people you know. I know at least half of this community. I know that, and I know if I was in New York um, I don't know, I just, you can't, you can't imagine (--) I don't see how I could know that many people, even as many as I know here, because the people just aren't as close in a large city.

J: Um, you're in twelfth grade now and are you planning on going to college?

B: Oh yeah, yeah.

J: And what do you plan on doing in college?

B: Well uh, well I plan on going to RPI. Um, and I really have no idea what I want to major in. Um, I'm kind of split three ways. And I have like three goals. If I major in math, mathematics, then I'd love to be a math teacher, particularly in North Adams. I'd like to stay in this area. I love this region. Um, if I major in nuclear engineering, then my goal is to work for Yankee Row and live in North Adams. Um, my other goal is in aerospace engineering and there really isn't a huge demand for it in North Adams. I'd love to work for NASAU. That would be, uh, that would be just wonderful if I could work for NASAU, then I probably wouldn't be able to live here in that case.

J: So you think that if you pursue your goals you will have enough options that if you want to come back here the options will be available and you will be able to stay?

B: Yeah.

J: Okay. How do you feel about the new development in Northern Berkshire, especially North Adams with Mass MoCA, the Greylock Glen Project, things like that?

B: Um, I think Mass MoCA is great. Um, it's probably the only hopes that this area has got for revitalization, or bringing back some economic stability at all. Um, personally contemporary art just doesn't (--) I don't get into it all that much, but I'm sure it would, it would impact this area a lot. Um, I'm more concerned about things like property values. It would tend to bring a large upper class population to this area. And uh, places like River Street which is one of the less desirable areas of the city [both laugh] would become, they say would become, it would be completely revitalized into luxury condominiums, or apartments, or whatever. And I wouldn't, I'm kind of concerned about what would happen to the poor people of the community. Something would have to be done. More low income housing would have to be, have to be constructed and something would definitely have to be done. It would have a great impact on this area.

J: So what you've described is kind of a two-fold situation. In one hand it is positive. Um, what would you say out weighs the other side? Do you think that it's more positive because of the jobs, or less positive because of the changes?

B: Oh, I think it is definitely more positive. Um, certainly with the tourism would revitalize business in the area and there would be more jobs available for people in the community. But um, I think, I think it is more positive than negative. [J: Umhm] The negative could be overcome.

J: Do you think that your parent have different views upon this, or do you think that they view it in much the same way?

B: Uh, I really don't know my parents view all that well. As far as I know they seem to be all for it. My father who loves North Adams as much as I do I'm sure is all [gunghoe] for this type

of project.

J: Umhm. And your grandparents, two of which live at the end of my street. [Laughs] Um, what do they feel about the project?

B: Uh, as far as I know it's all kind of, well if it helps North Adams then, then fine.

J: Okay. Do you have any other feelings about North Adams that you just would like to share? Is there anything special about it? Or anything that you think that other people think about it?

B: Um, personally the region, I just, I like the beauty, the mountains, the fall, the leaves, the foliage, it's gorgeous. Um, and I like, I just like the closeness of the region. Um, but other people I don't know. I don't see, I don't think that other people who live in the region certainly don't feel the way I do. And there seems to be an overall lack of pride. I think it's, I think there is, the pride is building a little bit. It's coming back, but it doesn't seem that people, other people in the area are as proud of the region as I am.

J: Um, what, what do you think is bringing the pride back? The new projects, or it is just an overall feeling?

B: It's just the new projects. Well the new projects create a feeling of, of revitalization and rebirth in the area. And so I think that is what is bringing the pride back.

J: You say that the pride is coming back into North Adams. Traditionally this has been an economically depressed area and do you think that that affects the people in any way?

B: Oh definitely. Um, like everyone I know, well a lot of people I know in high school are just, there's nothing here, there's no opportunity in this community at all. And North Adams is dying, it's dead, there's no hope. And as soon as they graduate they're getting out. That they're just leaving and they are never coming back. Um, that seems to be what has stricken me most about the impression I get of people here.

J: Okay. I know that you work in North Adams at Friendly's, which is a restaurant. Do you get any impressions of the people that live here through working there?

B: Well you certainly do have to deal with a wide variety of people at Friendly's. [Both laugh] Um, certainly there is a lot of the wealthier people along with the poorer people. I get an impression of uh, certainly working with elderly people who, who have to constantly save, scrimp and save. For some reason or other they have to have every penny accounted for and they, they tend to be a little, I don't know how to describe them. They're certainly not afraid to speak up at all. And um (--)

J: Do you think that there's a particular attitude due to the fact that they live here, that they might not have if they live someplace else?

B: Well, um, quite honestly I don't think that living here has affected them anymore than living

in some other community. Uh (--)

J: You work with a lot of different types of people too at Friendly's. There's younger people, but there are some older people who work there also. Um, do you think that they have any particular attitudes about North Adams?

B: Um, um, certainly I think that um, well the older who work there uh, well it seems that they are kind of this is where, this is where they are and this is where they will always be. And um, (both giggle) um, I suppose they couldn't, they couldn't imagine surviving somewhere else in a community where the economic situation is a lot different, particularly in a large city where, where things were, the cost of living is so much more expensive I couldn't, they couldn't imagine living in that type of environment.

J: Um, the younger people who work there, many of whom do go to college, do you think that they feel as though now they are in college, this is a place that they'd like to be, or do you think that even though they've experienced something else they'd still like to get away?

B: Um (--) Well uh, for the most part it just seems that the people, the younger people who are working there are just going to college here and beyond college I, they probably will not be here. And even if the people who live here now are going to school here in high school and are working there, as soon as high school is over and they go to college, no return to North Adams.

J: Um, do you think that there are any particular reasons why North Adams is such a turn off for these young people?

B: Most, mostly because it is so economically depressed, or it is coming out of a depression, or a recession and opportunity is not abundant here. Um, people just don't want to stay here, cause there is not a great opportunity here. You can go somewhere else and you can get a job anywhere. A good paying job anywhere.

J: Um, so with (--) Do you think that the advent of things like MASS MoCA will bring in other industries which will be important to the area? Or do you think it will be a primarily tourists associated industry?

B: Definitely a tourist industry. Um, I can see a lot of restaurant business coming in. The Hotel and Motel business. Um, I think North Adams' industrial age is, is over and I don't really see a return to that. Um, with the exception of whatever industry is left here, like what little bit of [unclear] Sprague's we have left or whatever. They're trying to create an industrial park in Adams, which might or might not work out, but for the most part it is going to be tourism oriented.

J: And do you think that people, older people you know, like your grandparents would be not, not necessarily upset, but almost nostalgic at the loss of the industry that has been associated here?

B: Um, I know that when Sprague's moved out of Marshall Street they were kind of, they were

rather upset. It's been like a part of North Adams for so long and industry manufacturing has been a part of this area for so long that adjusting to a change is going to be quite hard for them.

J: Um, now you said your grandmother worked at Sprague? [B: Umhm] And once before you said that you grandfather worked at the [Wallstreeter?] was it?

B: Umhm. My great grandfather.

J: Your great grandfather worked at the [Wallstreeter?]. And what did he do there?

B: Wow. Um, he, he was in charge of keeping the blast furnaces running. Real exciting job! [J: chuckles] Um, he, I guess there were like five furnaces and he had to continually shovel coal into the furnaces, make sure they don't dip below a certain temperature. It was (--) They describe the job and it's not very, it's not one of the nicer jobs, because the doors are always opened so he could just, for easy access just throw the coal in there. So it was real hot, really hot conditions. And I suppose an industrial type of community like that would have a lot of those types of jobs.

J: Um, I think another problem also is that now the jobs that will be associated with the area will require an educational background, you know, college, etc. Um, do you think that the youth in North Adams have this certain attitude about higher education?

B: Um, I don't know about youth in North Adams as youth in general. Um, it seems that higher education is necessary to survive in the world nowadays.

J: Um, because North Adams is such a poor community, um, much of the population is on Welfare, how do you think that affects them in their attitudes or their self-image?

B: Um, well certainly they kind of feel as if they're placed in this community and there's really very little they can do. And since there's little opportunity there doesn't seem to be much of an opportunity for them to get off of their public assistance program.

J: Do you think that it occurs to you most of these people that try to change the area, or do they pretty much accept it as it is and just kind of go along?

B: Um, it seems that they (--) Well they don't, they don't accept it as much as they, they kind of feel hopeless about doing anything to change the situation at all. Um.

J: Do you think that your attitude is different from theirs just simply because of the way you personally were brought up?

B: Definitely. [J: Unclear] I, I, well after my mother was divorced um, we lived on welfare for a couple of years and we lived in a low income housing project until I moved in with my father. And, and uh, well that's, that was certainly has impacted my life. Um, I certainly don't view welfare as a, as a worthless project and I understand how, I understand that (--) Well I know that there are people who cheat the system and I know personally people who, who manage to get

away with it. And they just lounge around at home and collect the welfare, but I knew from living there that (--) And it always seemed to me before that a majority of those people, there were, the majority of people on welfare were like that, but I know that is certainly not the case, because it's not fun to live on welfare. [Both laugh]

J: Um, why do you think your attitude is that you can change your position, but you say the majority of people have the attitude that they can't?

B: Well because I, um, my mother managed to get off welfare and was able to rearrange her life. And um, I've been able to see how a person can uh, can come out of a slump like that. And someone who lives on welfare who is unable to get off of that system for the time being feels hopeless, or for the most part their energies are devoted to getting off the system rather than changing what is going on in the community.

J: Um, with the revitalization that everyone is talking about there will be many more job opportunities, but do you think that these job opportunities will pay enough to support the raise in the cost of living that will probably happen here.

B: Oh, that's real interesting. Um, um, well the cost of living is definitely going to go way up in this community. Um, and I don't know that with the types of jobs that will become available that they will be able to pay enough to support certainly a family in this, in this area with that rise. Um, for the most part it just seems that um, it just seems that um, the only new jobs being brought into the area are more restaurant business, more hotel business and I don't see a great rise in the types of jobs that people need to support a family.

J: Um, do you think that if given the opportunity many of, many of the citizens of North Adams would leave if they could?

B: If they could. Um, certainly with the rise in cost of living I'm sure given the opportunity most of them would leave, because they'd just find it unaffordable. They would not be able to live here. To live comfortably. They could get by, but they wouldn't be able to live comfortably.

J: Um, when, when you are an adult, which I would not like to classified as a child, but when you are a full fledged adult and um, are earning your own living and making it on your own would you plan on having a family?

B: Oh definitely and I would love to have, to raise them here, because again I love this region and I like kind of being sheltered from, from the big city and the metropolitan problems that we don't have here, because it is a closer community and it's nice to be able to walk down main street and not worry about being mugged, or raped, or whatever. And uh, I would like to raise children in that type of environment.

J: Um, what would you foresee in your child's future growing up maybe ten years from now in North Adams.

B: Uh, well that's hard to say. Uh, certainly MASS MoCA will have, would have had by that

time a significant impact. I can see the community still prospering quite a bit. Um, um, there would probably be some, at that time problems with relocating for the poor in the community, because housing for the, the low income housing will be scarce at that time.

J: And um, when your children, say if you, if you do come back to live in North Adams, when your children are of an age to be in school, like you know, high school as you are now, do you think that the educational system in North Adams will be different than it is now? Better?

B: Um, I can't say for sure that it would be different. I would hope that it wouldn't be different, because I like the educational system here. Um, I think this high school offers, offers a lot of opportunity for young people. Certainly there are some unstressed aspects. Um, but for the most part the curriculum is, is uh, structured enough so that a young person can choose the curriculum that he or she feels is more suitable and most challenging.

J: And there, you described opportunities within, within school for people to do what they want. How do you explain the fact that many students do not become involved at all in what is going on?

B: Well uh, I don't know. It seems that there is certainly a lot of discrimination against uh (--) Well I think for the most part it's the fact that the students are segregated into clicks and the um, the people who are in the upper level classes tend to group and the people who are in the general non-college classes group together and whatever. And certain groups get into certain activities and it just seems for the most part that non-college, or certain groups of students don't get involved, because they just don't.

J: Do you, do you see a trend in, within the clicks that perhaps a non-college click is not on the whole as well off financially as a college prep or an honors click? Do you think that economics has anything to do with their course load?

B: Um, well it seems that um, that people who are raised in a relatively poor household aren't, don't have the initiative to take the more challenging courses. Um, I don't really quite understand why. It just seems that um, the more economically stable a family is then the more challenging the courses a student takes, or the more activities that a student will get into.

J: Do you think if a student who perhaps is taking a general course load, but is capable of taking a more difficult course load um, was pressured by a teacher, or even, or even another student, do you think that they would then have the aspiration to perhaps do something more with their lives than what their parents perhaps had?

B: I think certainly if, if they are capable of handling that kind, a tougher work load, a tougher course and they were pressured by teacher or parents to, to take that harder course then the initiative values I think would probably, would probably take more precedent in a person's life.

J: Do you think that many of the parents just simply don't expect that much out of life for their children in this area because they didn't get it, or do you think that they just don't know how to tell their children that they can go after something more?

B: Um, well it seems that um, the students in poorer households have (--) it's the trend, it just seems that the family life isn't as close, close knit of a family in a more economically stable household. And I don't think that parents in a, in a poorer household have the, the influence on their children that they should. And therefore the children just don't um, they don't make the initiative to do better. But a parent in a more stable household uh, influences his child more and I think let's the child know that they can do a lot better, or they can, they should do something more with their life.

J: So basically what you're saying is that the opportunity is there, but the initiative is not.

B: Right, definitely.

J: Do you get good grades in school Bill?

B: Uh, well yeah for the most part I do. And um, well I could do a lot better if I put my whole self into, into school, which I really don't. For some reason I just can't, I don't know, I just don't get into school at all.

J: You take all honors classes right?

B: Right, oh yeah.

J: And one AP?

B: One AP class.

J: Right. Do you think that there's any pressure for you to succeed because you come from such a depressed area?

B: Um, yeah I suppose there is. Um, uh, like my parents, there's a lot of pressure from my parents because, well I can really make something with my life if I put my whole mind and my whole heart into doing what I want to do. Um, particularly I can, my parents say I don't have to live here anymore. I can go to a better area and live a better life.

J: Do you think that they might be embarrassed about North Adams, or do they just not feel that it has enough to offer you?

B: They for the most part they just don't think it's, there's enough here for me to do, because it is so depressed.

J: Do you think that living in North Adams has affected the values that you have right now?

B: Uh, like what kind of values?

J: Things like, well there's a very high teenage pregnancy rate in North Adams and things of that

nature. Do you think that living here has made you view things like that in a different way?

B: Uh, I don't know if it's just living here, because I'm sure that any other city would have the same, the same type of high teen pregnancy rate. I'm sure that being, North Adams being in the spot light in terms of teen pregnancy has made me aware of those types of things. But uh, um, I suppose mostly it was the way I was raised that affected my values on things like that.

J: Do you think that you have a different view on relationships, like friendships um, that might be different if you had lived in a bigger city than a small town like North Adams.

B: Um, on friendships. Um, I suppose there is, there is a big difference because like I said earlier, a large city is just not as close together as a small one like North Adams. And you learn, you know a lot more people and you learn to, to uh, uh, you learn more about the values of friendship in this type of an environment than you would in a larger city.

J: People from surrounding towns, say like Williamstown, might have different perspectives about North Adams than you do. Uh, what do you think their perspectives of our city would be?

B: Well um, right now I'm sure that their views of North Adams are not (--) They don't hold North Adams in a very high esteem. Um, I suppose that once the museum goes in and uh, the more upper class people start moving into this, into this city, I'm sure that those views will change, but right now I know that North Adams is not, not viewed in a very bright light by, particularly by people in Williamstown.

J: Um, what would you tell those people about your feelings about North Adams if you had to tell them why they were wrong?

B: Um, why they were wrong? I really don't know what I would say because I think, I think the reason they put North Adams down so much is because there is such a large poor community and Williamstown is such a rich community. Um, all I keep thinking is that I could show them the disadvantages of being, being rich, particularly the snob attitude, but other than that I don't really know. It has a lot of future. North Adams has a lot of future and uh, (--)

J: Um, we've talked about North Adams being sheltered. Do you think that you've learned anything from living here that will help you in the real world because you've dealt with so many different types of people?

B: Oh, well I suppose in the real world, um, it could actually hurt me if I do in fact move to another area, because I'm just not use to living in that type of environment. Um, North Adams is so sheltered that my values, like friendship, have been affected and living in a larger area would certainly have a great impact on me. Um, I guess that's about it.

J: Do you think that there are certain aspects of North Adams which other people might not see that you see?

B: Um, certainly people (--) I don't know how much of the future that people actually see in

North Adams, because right now it just seems people have a tunnel vision about what North Adams is now and there's no future, there's (--) Right now there's no opportunity and we just got to get out of here as fast as we can, because there's just no opportunity here. Um, I think more and more as the museum becomes more of a reality people are beginning to see the great perspective future that the area has.

J: When these people realize the advantages to living in North Adams, do you think that the town will go under an irreversible change because of the influx of people? Or do you think it will remain basically the same, you know, small, small city that it is today?

B: Um, I think it will always be a small city. I don't envision any drastic change. I don't even see it getting as large as Pittsfield. But uh, um, in terms of changing from an industrial community to tourism oriented community, um, that would certainly be irreversible. And um, it's, even now it's to the point where of no return. There's no going back to what North Adams use to be. We're already in full swing of the museum and North Adams will, will certainly have to learn to adjust to what's coming ahead.

J: In this town there's a very strong religious base, [B: Umhm] whether it be Catholic or Protestant, any religion, but that seems to be very important. Do you think that that has affected you?

B: Oh definitely. I've been raised in a very strictly religious household. And both my parents were raised in strictly religious households. And uh, that certainly has affected me a lot. And I suppose living in North Adams um, because North Adams is so religiously based um, living here has affected that influence. I suppose living in a larger city would um, the religious contacts wouldn't be as great as they are here certainly. So living in North Adams has affected me that way.

J: Do you think that that religious base has affected the values of the majority of the people who live here? Or do you think it's just one facet of their lives?

B: Um, well uh, I suppose that a majority of the people who live here are uh, connected to religion and of course it affects values of people, but I don't know, I don't know that it has affect the overall values that people hold here. Certainly examples like teen pregnancy come to mind again.

J: There, in North Adams there are also the very strong Italian base. There's a fairly strong French base. Do you think that because these groups are out of proportion to what they would be in other areas of the country that people get a distorted perspective?

B: Um, well I think that um, having, having uh, a singular group of people, or a large proportion of this community being just a singular group it certainly does make uh, somewhat narrow view of society. And if you live in a larger city where the groups of people are much more diverse, than you get a wider range of values, what people think, etc.

J: Do you think that people in North Adams have a low tolerance for values or ideas that are not

common to the area? Or do you think that if given the opportunity other values could certainly be implemented here?

B: Um, that's hard to say. Right now because North Adams has been so depressed it's almost like uh, the population is kind of desperate for change in the area, but I think in the past having such a narrow perspective on values is a certain set of values that outside influence would have been rejected in this area.

J: Do you have any other comments that you would like to make about North Adams?

B: Um, I would just like to uh, I'd just like to (--) I would like the opportunity to be able to tell the people who live in North Adams now who really don't like the area, want to get out so badly, um, I'd just like the challenge them to remain in the area for some time and see what happens. Because I'm sure that once, once the museum and the Greylock Plan, I don't know how much of an effect that will have in the area, once all of this comes into action then there's a lot of change in store for North Adams and I'm sure that opportunities will emerge from all of that.

J: Okay, thank you Bill.